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SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

FOR DRL-IRF OFFICER ZAIBACK AND NEA/ARP HARRIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SA](#) [SOCI](#) [KWMN](#)
SUBJECT: FEMALE MUTAWWA'IN IN SAUDI ARABIA?

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SUMMARY

1. (SBU) In May 2009, the Shura Council approved a bill to allow the religious police to hire women. The bill, which would need to be approved by the Council of Ministers and King to become law, has provoked intense controversy and mostly negative public opinion. It is not likely to be approved so long as this continues. The debate illustrates the contradictory and heated opinions about the current restrictions on the presence of women in the workplace, a key impediment to the advancement of women's rights in Saudi Arabia. Underscoring the debate is puzzlement from both proponents and opponents of women's rights about the government's intent: will this help or hurt their cause? End summary.

BACKGROUND ON RELIGIOUS POLICE

2. (U) The Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV) is a semi-autonomous agency with the authority to monitor social behavior and enforce morality consistent with the SAG's interpretation of Islam, primarily, but not exclusively, within the public realm. Comprised of more than 3,500 officers and thousands of paid "volunteers," the religious police officers --mutawwa'in-- are required to wear identification badges and can enforce rules only when accompanied by a regular police officer (mutawwa'in do not have the authority to make arrests).

3. (U) The role of the mutawwa'in has become controversial in recent years, with the Saudi press full of debate about and criticism of overly zealous religious police practices. Many critics have called on the SAG to publish job descriptions to clarify the limits of mutawwa'in power. In February, the King appointed a new CPVPV chief to address such criticisms and curb zealotry by individual members, whose duties include confronting unrelated males and females caught alone together (the Arabic term for this is khulwa --seclusion-- and it is illegal), enforcing conservative Islamic dress codes, closing stores during prayer times, and seizing prohibited consumer products such as alcohol and pork.

4. (U) In June 2009, Interior Minister Prince Nayif announced a "strategic plan" to develop the CPVPV, aimed at modernizing the organization. In comments to the press, Nayif confirmed what he described as the CPVPV's "essential role in guiding an Islamic society," while acknowledging that "any organ which fails to develop will undoubtedly remain backward." He also urged the press not to "exaggerate the mistakes which might have been committed by the CPVPV." The strategic plan apparently did not address the issue of female

mutawwa'in.

SURPRISE BILL

15. (SBU) In May 2009, the Shura Council approved legislation to allow the CPVPV to hire women. The Shura Council's approval, however, does not mean Saudis will see female mutawwa'in on the streets in the near future. (NOTE: Before a Majlis-approved bill can become law, it must be forwarded to the Council of Ministers for study, endorsement, and final approval by the King. End note.) The bill has engendered intense public debate, and does not appear to have the support of the CPVPV itself. According to Shura member A'azib al-Misbil, during a Shura hearing on the matter, a CPVPV representative denied that the Commission had plans to establish a women's branch.

INTENSE DEBATE, VARIED REACTIONS

16. (SBU) Reaction garnered from the press and Embassy contacts has been diverse. Some flatly dismiss the idea. Others argue that the CPVPV's own rules would render the proposition impossible. Many women fear it would reduce the already limited freedoms they enjoy in women-only zones. Others point to self-appointed female volunteers already patrolling certain areas, and some suggest that having women working for the CPVPV would eliminate concerns about women in the workplace, thereby opening up employment opportunities for women.

17. (U) Opponents say the idea of female mutawwa'in would be

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an untenable contradiction of the CPVPV's responsibility for monitoring social behavior and enforcing morality. How could the Commission, which has long been one of the strongest and most outspoken opponents of women's employment outside the home, hire women? The very presence of female mutawwa'in would be illegal. Others cite the fact that women can't drive. Talal Al-Bakri, the head of the Social, Family and Youth Affairs Committee of the Shura Council told Arab News that "such a recommendation could not be implemented unless women were allowed to drive in the Kingdom."

18. (SBU) Supporters of the idea of female mutawwa'in point to the existence of self-appointed female volunteers, who for years have roamed shopping centers and other female gathering places harassing those they see as inappropriately dressed or not observing the prayer calls or committing other perceived infractions. Such "irregulars" could be acknowledged and properly trained, some observers suggest.

19. (SBU) Others recoil in horror, saying that what is needed is less of such harassment rather than more. Multiple female Embassy contacts, including two working for Al Multaqa, an exclusive women-only spa/gym, told us they feared that official female mutawwa'in severely restrict their privacy and the limited freedom women enjoy in female-only environments. Such places would be accessible to surveillance by female mutawwa'in, leaving no public "safe zones" for Saudi women.

SO WHAT DOES THIS REALLY MEAN?

110. (SBU) Underscoring the debate is puzzlement from both proponents and opponents of women's rights about the government's intent: will this help or hurt their cause? A Saudi university professor we spoke to contended that women likely to be hired as mutawwa'in would be ultra-conservative, poorly educated women who had never left the Kingdom. This professor saw the Shura Council bill as a message to the

liberal segment of Saudi society to "tone it down" and keep with mainstream conservative Saudi society, an unwelcome message, in her view. If the SAG was serious about advancing the status of women in Saudi Arabia, she opined, then the SAG would be putting them in positions of leadership that were not religious-based.

COMMENT: DEBATE ON A KEY
IMPEDIMENT TO WOMEN'S ADVANCEMENT

11. (SBU) The Shura Council's bill to recruit female mutawwa'in has thus far only sparked heated debate; it is unlikely to be adopted given the strong and apparently mostly negative public reaction. It is worth noting, however, because the debate --taking place in public-- provides a view of the complicated and often contradictory opinions regarding the presence of women in the workplace. The current restrictions are a key impediment to the advancement of women's rights in Saudi Arabia. The motivations of those behind the legislation are unclear. This could be an attempt to create a backlash to the idea of expanding the CPVPV's influence. On the other hand, allowing the CPVPV to hire women could also be a way to overcome the basic objection to "mixing" in the workplace, thereby removing a major obstacle to women's employment in other spheres. As with most other initiatives related to women, the SAG is unlikely to take definitive action as long as the controversy remains heated.
ERDMAN